Special Address to be delivered by H.E. Mr. D.N. Dhungyel,
Foreign Minister of the Kingdom of Bhutan
(*Pre-recorded video statement, Duration: 5 minutes*)

81st Session of the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, 21 April 2025

Theme: Regional Cooperation for resilient and sustainable urban development in Asia and the Pacific

Your Excellency Ms. Armida Salsiah Alisjahbana,
UN Under-Secretary-General and Executive Secretary of ESCAP,
Excellencies,
Ladies and gentlemen.

1. I bring to you the warm greetings of His Majesty The King and the people of Bhutan.

2. At the outset, I wish to commend ESCAP for its steadfast commitment to fostering regional cooperation throughout the last 81 years. This has helped our region meet our changing needs and address our many challenges.

3. The Asia Pacific region remains a crucial driver of global growth. It is home to 60% of the global population and houses some of the world's most dynamic urban centres. At the same time, it is also faced with growing challenges - ranging from climate change and environmental degradation to economic uncertainties and technological disruptions - that continue to threaten our collective progress. These shared and interconnected challenges underscore the vital importance of regional cooperation.

4. The theme of this session centred around "*Regional Cooperation for Resilient and Sustainable Urban Development*" is both timely and relevant.

5. Since ESCAP's creation in 1947, urban development across the world has evolved considerably. More so now, with technology-revolutionising urban efficiency and sustainability. The rapid pace of urbanisation brings with it both opportunities and responsibilities to adopt innovative and inclusive approaches.

6. Bhutan believes that urban development must prioritise the well-being of its people, while safeguarding the environment. All development in Bhutan is premised on the ethos of sustainability, guided by our development philosophy of Gross National Happiness. The 13th Five Year Plan and other strategies and policy instruments[1] are geared towards ensuring that cities and settlements are inclusive, livable and affordable, in accordance with SDG 11.

7. For access to safe, affordable, accessible and sustainable transport, the Government continues to invest in improving road and air networks. We are also investing in low-emission urban transport systems, including green public transport.

8. Bhutan has now embarked on an innovative project: the "Gelephu Mindfulness City (GMC)" in the south of Bhutan. Envisioned by His Majesty The King, the GMC integrates economic growth with mindfulness, holistic living, and sustainability. Spanning 2600 square kilometres of pristine forests and fertile farmlands, it will enable human innovation and

[1] National Urbanization Strategy 2008, Low Emission Development Strategy 2017, National Human Settlement Policy, 2019, and National Housing Policy 2020, National Construction Industry Policy, Bhutan Transport 2040 Integrated Strategic Vision.

natural ecosystems to thrive together, while fostering human well-being, environmental sustainability and mindful living.

9. Taking advantage of its strategic location, at the crossroads of the major economic regions of South Asia and Southeast Asia, the GMC is positioned to draw global investments not just into the city itself but across the entire region.

10. Given our shared challenges and geographic proximity, Bhutan firmly believes that regional partnerships play a pivotal role in driving economic growth, social progress, cultural exchange, people-to-people ties, and collective resilience in times of natural disasters. GMC presents a unique opportunity for our region to engage in a collaborative endeavour that transcends conventional urban development approaches. We believe that GMC can help promote ESCAP's goals of regional connectivity, economic integration and collaboration. I invite our fellow ESCAP Member States to participate in this pioneering initiative, so that we can draw upon our shared strengths and experiences to shape a better future.

11. Similar to other countries, Bhutan's urban areas, in particular the larger cities, face typical problems associated with increased population such as traffic congestion, low air quality, and waste management. In this context, the National Capital Region Strategy has been developed for the Thimphu-Paro capital region - the two most populous western districts, to transform it into one of the world's most livable areas by 2029. The Strategy blends nature-based design with high-quality infrastructure, sustainable mobility strategies to protect the region's unique heritage and landscapes, and natural hazard resilience, given our location in the seismically active Himalayan mountains.

12. The devastating earthquake witnessed by two of our Member States last month serves as a stark reminder of our vulnerability to natural disasters and emergencies. Given the threats of climate change and natural disasters, resilient and sustainable urban development have become more critical than ever. The Royal Government and people of Bhutan offer our deepest condolences to the governments and peoples of Myanmar and Thailand. The support and solidarity by countries, particularly Member States from our region, is highly encouraging. Such solidarity paves the way for faster recovery and reaffirms our collective humanity.

13. As we deliberate on strategies to advance resilient and sustainable urban development, let us reaffirm our collective commitment to building cities that are not only engines of economic growth but also protectors of social and environmental well-being. Bhutan stands ready to collaborate with our partners in the region and beyond in this important endeavour.

14. I wish the 81st session of ESCAP all success and wish you all fruitful discussions.

15. Thank you and Tashi Delek.

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